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CAPT. ALEXANDER BELL AND THE "BELL BLOCK."

BY HENRY D. BARROWS.

[Read February 6, and March 6, 1893.]

As I saw in December of last year, (1892), the work of demolishing the historic "Bell Block" on the old corner of Aliso and Los Angeles streets, to make room for the foundations of a new brick block covering the former site and extending forty or fifty feet, or more, westward to the new line of Los Angeles street, a flood of reminiscences came over me of persons, events and episodes connected with that locality, in the olden time.

I first saw that historic landmark, (for it was one of the few two-story adobe buildings in this then one-story adobe town), in 1854; though it was built nine or ten years before. My old friend Elijah Moulton, who is still a resident of this city, tells me that Capt. Bell was building the block when he, Moulton, arrived here in the year 1845.

The early archives in the Recorder's office of Los Angeles county, show that Don Luis Vignes, the very earliest pioneer of the French colony, whom I remember well, sold a lot to Capt. Bell in 1844, "contiguous to the Zanja (water-ditch) and fronting the house of Senora Teodocia Saiz, which extended 95 varas on the east, 105 on the west; Los Angeles street, about 292 feet; 80 varas on the north, or about 222 feet on Aliso street, and 88 varas on its south side," or adjoining Dona Teodocia's place, which was where the "White House" now stands.

The deed, which is written in large, fair hand, in the Spanish language (probably by Don Ygnacio Coronel, father of Hon. A. F. Coronel), is acknowledged before "Manuel Requena, Alcalde I^o constitucional: Jues de I^o Instancia, y presidente del Yl. ^o Ayuntamiento de la ciudad de Los Angeles, etc., Abril 1, 1844." It was witnessed by Casildo Aguilar and Juan Domingo; and a note was appended that the instrument was written on common paper for lack of stamped paper.

Exactly how long a time was consumed in building the Bell Block, or "Bell's Row" as it used to be called, I do not know. The two-story portion of the building only extended along the Aliso street front; and a part of the Los Angeles street front. The balance of the latter to the south consisted of a one-story row of stores, which were occupied by small dealers for many years.

The upper story on the corner and fronting Aliso street was long the residence of Capt. Bell, and also, for a considerable period, of Mr. Francis Mellus. I remember very well attending a grand ball given there by the Melluses, I think in 1855 or '56.

Of the few persons whom I can now recall as being present then, (I was a comparative stranger and had not made as yet many acquaintances,) I distinctly remember Don Juan Bandini, ancestor of the Bandinis of Southern California and a prominent historical character, who was a fine dancer and a very vivacious and distinguished personage. Most of the principal families of the Pueblo were present.

There was a spacious area back of the block which included a small flower garden, orangey, etc., near the zanja.

In the latter part of Capt. Bell's life, he sold portions of the south end of his lot to, I think, Mr. Heinsch, and perhaps others.

As the portion of the block which he retained came to need repairs, and as the march of improvement seemed to demand a better building, he was in doubt whether or not he would tear down the adobe and replace it with a brick block. But, as I suppose, his available means would not justify so expensive an undertaking, (brick blocks in Los Angeles cost more then than they do now,) he finally put up a brick facing around the adobe walls of his block and made other improvements costing, I believe, about \$12,000 or \$15,000.

Of the tenants who occupied the corner store in early times (this was then a central and very prominent corner,) there were the dry goods merchants, Lazard & Kremer, (both still living and still residents of Los Angeles) Lazard & Wolfskill, S. Lazard & Co., Lazard & Eugene Meyer (the latter now being manager of the London, Paris and American Bank of San Francisco;) Kalisher & Wartenburg, (both deceased;) and later, for a number of years, this corner was occupied as a butcher shop by the Sentous Bros.

When I first came to Los Angeles, I remember very well that one of the small stores of the one-story "Row" on Los Angeles street, some distance south of the corner, was occupied as a book and stationery store by two Hellman brothers, one of whom was the late I. M. Hellman, who afterwards had a large dry goods store in the "Arcadia or Stearns Block" on the opposite side of Los Angeles street; and who later built the block extending from Main to Los Angeles street, now occupied by the Crystal Palace store; the Schlessingers, and if I mistake not, Louis "Chino" Phillips, now of Spadra, used to do business in this Los Angeles street "Bell Row."

The wide space between the Bell Block on the east and the Stearns property on the west side of Los Angeles street, and the Coronel Block now demolished, between Sanchez street and Negro alley on the north, formed quite a large public square or area, which was the scene of many interesting events and episodes, first and last. For many years the city scales were located on this square where the farmers and teamsters used to come to weigh their hay, grain, brea, (asphaltum), etc.

Sheriff Getman was shot and killed on this square, near the foot of Negro alley; and the Chinese riot of the early 70's took place mostly on this square.

At the Bell corner some time in the 60's, I saw a shooting affray between Col. E. J. C. Kewen and a man by the name of Fred Lemberg, well known at the time by the sobriquet of the "Flying Dutchman."

The latter, who was a thoroughly peaceable man, though he did not fear the face of man or devil, was a son-in-law of old man Bors, the miller, who owned, and I believe built the mill which was located on the site of the distillery east of the river on Macy street.

Kewen and the Flying Dutchman had previously had some difficulty.

At this time they met on the sidewalk on the west side of Los Angeles street, near Commercial, in front of the store now occupied by J. B. Cohn. They apparently had some words, and soon came to blows; whereupon the Dutchman, who was a rather slightly built but muscular man, promptly knocked Kewen down. The latter jumped up and made for his antagonist, who again knocked him *hors du combat* on the dirt sidewalk. (We had no cement sidewalks here in those days.)

Lemberg then went about his business, going up Commercial street and Kewen came towards our store, (next to Foy's harness store) where he met my partner, John D. Hicks, and myself and Tom J. Wiggins of El Monte. The latter had a six-shooter in his belt, and Kewen begged Wiggins to let him have his pistol, for, said he in tragic tones, "He struck me!"

Those of us who knew both parties well, and who saw the whole transaction, were of the opinion that if he had given no provocation, he would not have been "struck." Hicks asked Kewen to go back to the hydrant, in the rear of the store, and wash off the blood on his face, which he did.

He then tried hard to borrow Wiggins' pistol, but without avail, then. But he subsequently obtained a pistol from somebody, and, later in the day, as Lemberg came down Commercial street, across Los Angeles street, and passed along by the "Bell Row" towards Aliso, Kewen, who it appeared had been on the watch for him, crossed over from John Jones' store (now Harrison & Dickson's) to the Bell corner, to head him off, where he opened fire on the Dutchman, who promptly returned the fusillade. There was a big post on the corner, on the edge of the sidewalk, and around this post the battle raged.

Bang, bang! shot after shot was fired, till at last Lemberg fell, having received a ball in the groin, I believe.

As he fell, I remember Hicks ejaculated with intense feeling, "Oh! that is too bad! too bad!" And we all felt that it was a sad commentary on our civilization that a citizen should be driven into a fight, and then shot down (and, as we then supposed, killed) in that way.

The wounded man was taken to the east end of Bell Block on Aliso street, or to the next building, where I believe he and his family lived, where, after some months, in mid-summer, his wound finally healed. I recollect seeing Kewen come in town from San Gabriel one day not long after, or before Lemberg had entirely recovered, in his buggy; and I noticed that he had a double-barreled shot-gun by his side; and he also had a man in the buggy with him. But Lemberg did not disturb him then or afterwards.

The German and other friends of Lemberg contributed funds to aid him to go to Arizona or Sonora, where he had some mines which he proposed to work.

On the way, and on the other side of the Colorado river, I believe, he was waylaid and killed by highwaymen or Indians.

Kewen, I think, was afterwards fined lightly by the court, and thus the affair ended.

CAPTAIN ALEXANDER BELL

Having thus given an account of the Bell Block, it may be of interest to tell, in the same connection, something about Capt. Bell himself, and incidentally of others who resided, or did business, in the Block, or otherwise were intimately connected with him.

Mr. Bell was a native of Washington county, Penn., where he was born January 9, 1801, the same year in which Ex-Gov. Pio Pico was born, who is still living.

In 1823, when 22 years of age, Mr. Bell went to Mexico where he engaged in trade about nineteen years, or till 1842, when he came *via* Guaymas and Mazatlan to San Pedro and to Los Angeles, at which latter place he resided till his death, July 24, 1871.

In 1844 he married Doña Nieves Guirado. Don Manuel Requena and Don Santiago Johnson, each married sisters of Mrs. Bell; and Don Rafael Guirado, father of Ex-Gov. Downey's first wife, was a brother of these three sisters. All of these persons are now deceased. I knew every one of them, some of them quite intimately, except Mr. Johnson.

Mr. and Mrs. Bell were my "Compadres," that is they were "padrinos" of my eldest child, and therefore sustained towards me that exceedingly near and pleasant relation of "Compadre" and "Comadre," so common in all Spanish countries, but which is almost unknown among Anglo-Saxons or Anglo-Americans, and for which, I believe, there is no equivalent term in the English language.

Those terms of "comadre" and "compadre," and of "padrino," (God-father,) and "madrina," (God-mother,) as well as their correlative terms, "Ahijado," (God-son,) and "Ahijada," (God-daughter,) are terms of endearment which bind millions of families together all over the world,

where the Castilian language is spoken and the Catholic religion prevails.

The standing as "padrinos" or God-parents at the baptism of a child, theoretically supposes that the God-parents (as in the administration of the same symbollic rite in the Episcopal church,) will look after the religious training of the child, in case of the death or neglect of its natural parents.

But whether this theory is carried out from the religious standpoint or not, the tender relations of "padrinos" and "ahijados," i. e. between God-parents and God-children, and the ties,—only second in nearness and eventually in genuine affection, to those of blood-relationship—of "Compadres" between the real parents and the God-parents, are firmly and permanently established, only to be severed by the death of one or other of the parties.

Mr. and Mrs. Bell had no children of their own; but they stood as sponsors for the children of a great many other people, whereby they became the "compadres" of the latter, and the affectionate "padrinos," or "foster-parents" as it were, of the former.

Whenever the parents and God-parents met, the salutations would be, "compadre" or "comadre," as the case might be; and the greeting of God parents and God-children would be, "padrino" or "madrina," and "ahijado" or "ahijada."

These relationships are beautiful and tender, and add a wonderful charm to life in Spanish-Catholic communities, to which English-speaking communities, as a rule, are almost total strangers.

In Mexican times Mr. Bell had a store on Main street, where the St. Charles hotel now stands, the building then being a one-story adobe.

When I came here in 1854, Mr. and Mrs. Bell lived in a two-story frame house on the east side of Main street, north of Arcadia, which he afterwards sold to Seignoret. Whilst they lived on Main street, Mr. Francis Mellus resided in the Bell Block, which, meanwhile, and for a number of years, was known as the "Mellus Block," or "Mellus Row." I believe Mr. Mellus bought the block of Capt. Bell and then sold it back to him again.

At the time of the change of government, Mr. Bell became captain of an American military company; and he took part in the engagement with Carrillo and Flores, near the Lugo ranch. Afterwards he went with his company to San Diego. A portion of his men returning with Capt. Hensley's command, took part in the affairs of "Paso de Bartolo" and "La Mesa." Some of these men were: Victor Prudhom, H. C. Cardwell, Jose Mascarel, John Behn, Daniel Sexton and John Reed. All of these were citizens of

Los Angeles city or county, and all of them I knew. All are dead except Mr. Mascarel, and possibly Mr. Sexton, who, the last I knew of him, lived in San Bernardino county.

When Frémont was here the first time, he made his headquarters at Bell's Block ; and while there he gave a grand ball which was largely attended.

Capt. Bell was an ardent republican, and was one of the four Frémont presidential electors for California, in 1856.

Capt. Bell was the owner of "La Providencia" rancho, on a portion of which the town of Burbank is located. This rancho joined the ex Mission rancho of San Fernando ; but the line dividing the two, in the Mexican title papers, was not very clearly defined. The United States court appointed two commissioners, with authority, in case they could not agree, to select a third commissioner, to run this line. The two commissioners appointed by the court were Col. J. J. Warner and H. D. Barrows. Capt. Bell represented the "Providencia," and Gen. Andres Pico, half-owner, (with Eulogio de Celis of Spain) of the ex-Mission rancho of 120,000 acres, represented the latter.

We met many times ; went onto the ground when necessary ; but it seemed next to impossible to agree on any division line which would conform to the terms of the grant, and which, at the same time, would at all satisfy the claimants. The question of water was the chief point on which they would not agree.

Whilst the commissioners might have decided the matter arbitrarily, they preferred to exhaust every means possible, to secure the assent of both parties in interest, to their decision, before they made the same final. Each meeting would end in a hot discussion between the two claimants, always courteous but without practical results.

At last, Matthew Keller was chosen as the third commissioner, and after numerous meetings, a dividing line reasonably satisfactory to the representatives of the two big ranchos, was agreed upon, and was embodied in a report to the Court, which finally approved the same ; and I suppose, it is the one which is recognized as the boundary line to the present day.

Capt. Bell, in after years, sold the Providencia rancho to Dr. David Burbank of this city, who, I believe, still retains an interest in it ; though in the boom, the rancho, or a portion of it, was sold to a syndicate, and the town of Burbank was laid out, on the line of the Southern Pacific railway.

The contiguous ranchos were, on the west, the ex-Mission rancho ; on the north, public lands ; on the east, San Rafael and Los Felis ranchos ; and on the south the top of the range of hills east of Cahuenga Pass.

The rancho is a valuable one.

Capt. Bell, my "compadre," came to me, sometime in the sixties, and asked if I would serve as one of the administrators of his estate in case he were to name me as such in his will.

As I could give no very valid reason why I could not serve, if he really desired it, he had his will drawn up accordingly, and brought it to me to be deposited in our safe, as there were no banks or safe-deposit vaults in those days. Two or three times, as he sold real estate, (the southern portion of his block, or his house on Main street, or the Providencia rancho,) he came to me to get his will, to make the necessary changes required by such real estate sales.

He made these several wills, and what their provisions were, of course, I never knew, as those were matters that did not interest me. His final will, made just before his death in 1871, by Mr. Glassell, I think, appointed John G. Downey, Solomon Lazard and myself, as executors and trustees of the estate during the lifetime of Mrs. Bell; giving one undivided half of the property to his grand-nephew, Jas. H. Bell, the other half going by operation of law, to his wife.

The three executors of the will, after the death of Mr. Bell, qualified and served about a year, when Gov. Downey and Mr. Lazard resigned. I served about nine years. Mrs. Bell died a few years ago. Mrs. Trudell, formerly the wife of Henry Mellus, and her niece, took care of Mrs. Bell during the latter years of her life.

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In jotting down these desultory reminiscences of my old "Compadre," Capt. Bell, and his "Block;" memories of many other persons and scenes and episodes of the "olden times" have been awakened; but I will close with a brief mention, (condensed partly from Bancroft's Pioneer Register,) of the two Melluses, who came here as boys or young men, from Boston; both of whom afterwards became prominent and respected citizens of this place; Henry Mellus having been elected mayor of this city in 1860; and his brother, Francis, having been for years a leading merchant.

Henry Mellus came to this coast in 1835, with Dana before the mast, on the *Pilgrim*. In the census of the Pueblo, taken in 1836, his name was included and his age given as 26 years. In 1837-8 he visited the United States, but returned in 1839, and made his home chiefly in Los Angeles.

In 1845 Henry Mellus formed a partnership with Capt. D. M. Howard, and this firm became the most prominent firm in San Francisco, buying the Hudson Bay Co's property there in 1846, and building the first brick store in town, and established branches at San Jose, Los Angeles and Sacramento. He became the owner of many town lots and a very rich man.

In 1847 he married Anita, daughter of James (Santiago) Johnson of Los Angeles, and in 1848 he made a visit to the East; and on his return he had a stroke of apoplexy, from the effects of which he never entirely recovered.

In 1850 he sold his interest to the firm of Howard & Mellus, and went East. Subsequently he lost a portion of his wealth in unfortunate business enterprises.

In 1859 he returned and settled in Los Angeles. I remember he lived with his family in the west portion of the second story of the Temple Block, which old Johnny Temple had just built.

Henry Mellus was elected Mayor of Los Angeles in May of 1860, but died in office in December of the same year. He left a widow and several children. Mrs. Mellus afterward married J. B. Trudell.

"Henry Mellus," as Bancroft says, "was a man of remarkable business ability, of good character and of courteous and pleasing manners."

Francis Mellus was a native of Boston, and he came to this part of the world on the *California*, in 1839, when he was fifteen years of age, as a clerk of A. B. Thompson of Santa Barbara. At a recent meeting of this society Mr. J. Guinn read an interesting account of Frank Mellus' first visit to Los Angeles, derived from his own diary, kept for a number of years after he left Boston. From January, 1849, he was a partner with his brother, in the firm of W. D. M. Howard & Co., of San Francisco; and from 1850 to '56, with David W. Alexander, he had charge of a branch of the business at Los Angeles, where he thereafter became a permanent resident.

In 1852-3 he was County Treasurer; in 1854 he was a member of the City Council; and in 1855 he represented the County in the Legislature.

He died in 1863, leaving a widow, Doña Adelaida, (daughter of Santiago Johnson,) and seven children. Doña Adelaida, who is still a resident of this city, after the death of her first husband, married D. W. Alexander, who died not many years ago at Wilmington.

There are now many descendants of the two Mellus brothers residing in Los Angeles county.